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Realism, Idealism, and U.S. Foreign Policy In the Islamic World: Why Democratic Realpolitik is Essential

Robert J. Bunker

Enough comment and critical debate has been generated by the essay [Why We Should Support Democratic Revolution in the Islamic World](#) to warrant further elaboration on the themes it contains and why support of the despotic status quo in the Islamic World is not only morally unacceptable but, more importantly for many of the *Small Wars Journal* readership, no longer rational from the perspective of realpolitik and purely selfish U.S. interests at home and abroad. The latter concern shall be addressed first since those who are presently students of insurgency and foreign policy tend to focus on realism—how things really are—over idealism—how things can or should be. The elements of national power and morality should be complimentary to one another in U.S. foreign policy but for many reasons, including our increasing loss of political and economic dominance, the balance has overwhelmingly shifted to the primacy of retaining power, ultimately coercive military capability, coupled with that of promoting corporate profit and the American standard of living.

The prevailing foreign policy lesson learned over the last half-century is that a friendly despot in control is worth far more than a potential democratic leader (representative of a free and open society) waiting to arise because of the high political risks involved. The potentials for a belligerent Ayatollah (representative of a hostile theocracy) replacing an allied Shah are simply too great to accept. This is representative of the basic cost-benefit foreign policy calculation that now dominates. We have been conditioned to participate in a long running zero-sum game. In this game, the U.S. people and its government benefit as do our autocratic client states, including the foreign despots, and elites and cronies who surround them. The fact that we damn the peoples who live under these friendly despotic regimes to a form of governance devoid of our basic freedoms and political rights is viewed as an acceptable form of collateral damage. Many would say these peoples—such as the Egyptians—are better off under such ‘fatherly and benign rulers’ as Hosni Mubarak. Far better him and his cronies than the monster hiding in the closet—the Muslim Brotherhood—who would not only make life worse for the common Egyptian but would immediately renounce peace with Israel and would also put the U.S. in its gun sights. From a status quo U.S. foreign policy perspective, things have pretty much been figured out—U.S. interests are best served by this method of cost-benefit analysis.

History is replete with these ‘fatherly and benign rulers’—King George the III and King Luis the XVI, on the eve of the American and French Revolutions respectively, are well known to most U.S. and French school children. Even Vladimir Putin of Russia—now its paternalistic

prime minister—would likely fit this bill as would our close friend King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia. The core problem with these despots is that they care little for the common man, be it their own nationals or U.S. citizens. We are nothing to them—they are autocratic elites with no affinity for their own lower class nationals or for middle class Americans. Our current governmental relationship to these elites is one of political expediency, marriages of convenience, and patron-clientism via U.S. financial and military aid. It is the latter that is of most concern because it is this form of relations that is no longer sustainable as it once was. The U.S. debt is now at \$14 trillion with about \$1.3 trillion in yearly deficits due to the simple fact that more public monies are spent than those that come in via taxation and other revenues. Continuing high levels of American military spending and its enviable standard of living have been prolonged through the selling of public debt. A billion in foreign aid here and another billion in military grants there at some point is going to start sounding like real money when this financial house-of-cards built on high levels of public debt begins to shift and buckle.

What is potentially worse is that competing countries flush with cash and upward economic momentum, such as autocratic China, are positioning themselves to increasingly pick up their own friendly despots. Since our relationship with despots such as Mubarak is solely defined by our aid and those with the House of Saud by our ability to protect it—and of course not interfere with their questionable internal policies—it is inherently fragile and politically ethereal. The long running zero-sum game that we have been playing is likely coming to an end not because we don't want to continue it but because we won't be able to economically do so due to, either due to lack of resources or the inability to outbid competing states. Our supposed friends will vanish like unpaid 15th Century Swiss mercenaries (*point d'argent, point des Suisses*) or contemporary Blackwater security contractors. The bond that defines our international relationship with corrupt despots will thus degrade over time. The handwriting is on the wall—this form of realpolitik will no longer serve us into the future.

National self-interest now requires that we reevaluate our relationship to autocratic states, both client and otherwise, in the Islamic World and, for that matter, everywhere else. Our interests are now best served by implementing a new U.S. foreign policy approach—one that is sum-sum for our country and the burgeoning masses who live under the yoke of oppression in autocratic Islamic states. Under this new sum-sum strategy, we 'play the old diplomatic game' and hold our friendly despots even closer while we do everything in our power, short of getting caught (and of course not engaging in crimes against humanity), to seize upon golden opportunities that are now presenting themselves in Egypt and in other Islamic lands to support Democratic revolution. We should not instigate it and we should not invade like in Iraq—Democracy should be seductive, something that is desired and not necessarily forced upon others. If the spark of Democratic revolution should come about spontaneously due to the actions of flash mobs and social network-inspired rioting or is orchestrated from within by more organized bodies, we should support it from the shadows. If a critical tipping point is approached—one in which relative superiority hangs in the balance—and if the stakes are worth it, we may even need to show our hand and threaten or buy off the targeted despot and his military forces in order to make them stand down.

This new proposed approach to U.S. foreign policy is, of course, not without its detractions. We will see some states lost to Islamic religious extremism, civil wars will break out, many people will occasionally die, and our globalized economy shall, at times, suffer severely because of it.

Tens of millions died in the Second World War—the conflicts and wars of the 21st century will quite possibly see an equal if not larger body count before this century plays out. Still, the prevailing U.S. foreign policy lesson learned over the last half-century has not been forgotten and no attempts at sugarcoating any deviation from it are being made. Many will seek to hold fast to the U.S. status quo approach to realpolitik but as argued here this is increasingly untenable and we will eventually become ‘international relations road kill’ because of it. Rather, we should seek to follow a policy that fosters the growth of democracies whenever the targets of opportunity arise, the intent being to quietly promote and expand our form of governance in a cost effective and sustainable manner. Realistically, we are not presently in a position to come to the aid of those protesting in a 1989 Tiananmen Square-like scenario, but we should do what we are reasonably and pragmatically able to accomplish. Realism and idealism must always exist in balance, with one not sacrificed for the benefit of the other, if our nation is to remain strong.

The other theme, far less difficult to sell, is that of the inherent contradictions of our democracy supporting the despotic status quo in the Islamic World. We do so because of fear—the fear that the political climate will get worse and become radicalized and not better and more democratic. We have been burned in the past and therefore the lesson learned is that we will again get burned in the future. While not only a pessimistic and victim’s view of international relations—some would say that a pessimistic is an optimist that has been mugged or worse—it takes a lifeboat approach to governance and freedom in general. The citizens of the United States and the other, primarily Western, democracies of the world have gotten theirs and those benefits, such as high standards of living for the many and numerous individual rights, should never be endangered. This position thus endorses the position that the typical lower class Egyptian is therefore not our concern since they mean nothing to our people—just as middle class America is nothing to the Princes of the House of Saud. This is a morally reprehensible stance, elitist, and also one that is extremely dangerous for us to hold.

If nascent and fledgling democracies attempt to arise and, rather than giving them our helping hand, we turn our back on them or worse crush their efforts by backing the corrupt despots they seek to replace, it would set a dangerous precedent for the future. Those democracies will owe us nothing, potentially harbor very strong feelings of animosity, and ultimately may turn their back upon us in our future times of need. Just deeds often reap future dividends—as an American Army officer serving in France during World War I imparted in his utterance, “La Fayette, we are here!” Hopefully, others across the globe will have good reason to say honorable things about our leaders. Hence, the primacy of democratic governance and its gradual expansion—sought by others on their own and never forced upon them—must now form the basis of U.S. foreign policy.

We, the American people, have no idea how this century will fully unfold, but it will likely contain powerful autocratic regimes, such as Russia and China, more instances of Islamic religious extremism taking root in addition to that which presently exists in Iran, Southern Lebanon, Gaza, Afghanistan, Western Pakistan, and other lands, and of course the criminal insurgencies being waged by the gangs and cartels in Mexico and Central America. The international system is shifting with wars taking place between state and non-state entities and their coalitions and networks in a global free-for-all. The guiding precept behind Democratic Realpolitik in this emerging international system is the primacy of democratic governance as the

basis of humanity's future social and political organization. If such a global vision is to be achieved, we will need many allies—free and democratic peoples with which we have a strong and unbreakable bond. While the states of the European Union, Brazil, India, Japan, South Korea, and others not so named exist, we are going to need many more before the conflicts of this century end. These new allies will arise from the Tunisias and the Egypts of the world and in the process their peoples—not just their elites—will be far better off for it. So will the United States because once again its moral compass will be back on course.

Dr. Robert J. Bunker is a frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal. He has over 200 publications including Non-State Threats and Future Wars (editor); Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency (editor); Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers (editor); and Narcos Over the Border (editor). He can be reached at bunker@usc.edu.

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